

CLOSING STATEMENT KATHRYN O'LEARY HIGGINS

NTSB SAFETY FORUM ON UNMANNED AIRCRAFT SYSTEMS

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First, I want to thank all who've made this forum so successful:

- All the panelists who shared their knowledge and expertise.
- My fellow Board Members who took time from their busy schedules to join me for the last two days.
- Tom Haueter and Vern Ellingstad who fielded questions from the audience, and added a few good ones of their own.
- And, last but by no means least, our wonderful technical panel and all the staff who supported them. Some you've not seen, but there are many others working behind the scenes. They deserve the credit and our thanks for this event.

As I said yesterday, the impetus for this forum was the first unmanned aircraft system accident the Board investigated. We knew we needed to learn more. I am confident we achieved that goal as a result of all the excellent presentations we've heard over the last two days.

Our second objective was to foster a dialogue about the safety issues inherent in integrating unmanned aircraft systems into our national airspace system. We wanted to share the experience of the military, the public use operators, manufacturers, and others – what has worked, what hasn't, what are the issues, what are the challenges, what are the benefits, what are the risks, how can we make it work better?

We've also achieved that goal...and it is my personal hope that we can find a way to continue this dialogue. It is clear that everyone who participated is committed to integrating unmanned aircraft systems into the national airspace system at a level of safety equivalent to that required for manned aircraft. But the definition of equivalent has to be defined.

I don't want to end this session without reflecting on another important (perhaps the most important) message I heard –General Kostelnik called it “the WHY” – the enormous potential this technology has to accomplish our nation's top priorities:

- Advancing our National security.
- Protecting our homeland.
- Expanding our understanding of climate change.
- Tracking the pace and direction of hurricanes.
- Aiding firefighting.
- Monitoring pipelines and nuclear facilities.
- Assisting local law enforcement.
- This is much more than pizza and package delivery.

These are safety-critical missions. All of these missions are currently being accomplished safely in the national airspace system, but on a limited basis.

We heard compelling testimony about the cost effectiveness of using this technology, as compared to the cost and risks of manned flights completing similar critical missions:

- Longer flying time for surveillance and reconnaissance.
- Longer distances flown.
- Less fuel used.
- Less risk to crews.

Arguably, these missions, using unmanned aircraft systems are saving both money and lives.

But the successes we've heard about can't be replicated and expanded any time soon, or in any significant way, unless we find a way to successfully and safely integrate these operations, and more that will come, more fully into the national airspace system.

As we've heard, there are many issues. But I'm convinced that we know how to do this. We've done it before. We don't need to reinvent the wheel. We can build on our collective experience and learn from each others mistakes. I do believe it is a matter of priorities, resources, and leadership. The FAA's dedicated staff is working hard but they can't do it alone. And that is the challenge for all of us. It is the old, but familiar, issue of "will and wallet." I also believe – while it won't be easy, "where there is a will, there is a way."

I had the opportunity a few months ago to hear Gene Cernan – the last man to walk on the moon. He took that last walk 36 years ago, in 1972. He quoted from the speech John Kennedy gave at Rice University in Houston in 1962 – 10 years before Captain Cernan took that last walk. "We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win..."

Next year, we will celebrate the 40th anniversary of Neil Armstrong's first walk on the moon. Surely, if this nation could put a man on the moon 40 years ago, less than a decade after President Kennedy set the goal, we can come together and work together to find the will, the way, and the wallet to fully and safely integrate unmanned aircraft into the national aviation system. It won't be easy. But I believe we must and we can do so, hopefully in less time that it took to put a man on the moon – to defend our country, protect our homeland, and accomplish other vital national missions so critical to our country's future.

Thank you, we have a lot to do, so let's get to work.

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